

# J.G. Ballard's Crash Course and the Year 1973

Takayuki Tatsumi

I started reading science fiction in the late 1960s, when *Hayakawa's SF Magazine*, the only professional sf magazine in Japan, began featuring the Anglo-American New Wave regularly. With the help of the distinguished translator/critic Norio Itoh, whose skilful translations include works by J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Kurt Vonnegut, Samuel Delany, James Tiptree, Jr., Cordwainer Smith and others, the Japanese sf community accepted the significance of the New Wave so keenly that writers like Koichi Yamano and Yoshio Aramaki began experimenting with Japanese speculative fiction, leading a heated controversy on the literary significance of sf. Yamano launched the heavily theoretical quarterly *NW-SF* (edited by Kazuko Yamada), and became known as a New Wave critic; his provocative essay "Japanese SF: Its Originality and Orientation" (1969), a scathing attack on contemporary Japanese science fiction, was edited by Darko Suvin and reprinted in the March 1994 issue of *Science-Fiction Studies* (tr. Kazuko Behrens). Aramaki showed some Ballardian influence in his early short stories such as "Soft Clocks" (1968-70), his hard-scientific reinterpretation of Salvador Dali's surrealistic paintings, which later was Englished by one of the original Cyberpunks, Lewis Shiner, and reprinted in the January-February 1989 issue of *Interzone* (tr. Kazuko Behrens).

The greatest Japanese appropriation of the New Wave, however, was by Yasutaka Tsutsui, the winner of numerous awards in sf and the mainstream, whose masterpieces include a Ballardian surrealistic short story, "The Standing Woman" (1974; tr. David Lewis, *Omni*, January 1981), in which mammals melt into vegetables literally and figuratively. Tsutsui started his career as an sf writer in the mid-1960s, and during the 70s gradually came to transgress the generic boundaries between serious and popular literature. He established his own theory of "hyper-fictionality," which reflects back the nature of literary genres and foregrounds the fictionality they tried to

repress: "I do not find it accidental that from the 60s through the 70s, just while the post-surrealist mode nurtured British New Wave and North-American Metafiction and Latin American Magic Realism, I was making every effort to develop my own theory of hyper-fictionality without knowing those western literary experiments" (unpublished remarks made in 1991).

Of course, I'm not sure if what was going on in the early 70s in the Japanese New Wave movement made much sense to junior sf fans such as me. The Japanese formation of a science-fiction market in the 60s, begun by the monthly publication of *Hayakawa's SFM* from February 1960, owed much to the Golden Age of Anglo-American hardcore sf; major Japanese sf writers constructed their careers by following the examples of Clarke, Asimov, Heinlein, Sheckley, Bester, Bradbury and others. What the Anglo-American sf market developed between the 1920s and the 1950s had to be studied and emulated by Japan only in the 60s, too quickly and in too condensed a fashion. As with any movement in its high-growth period, Japanese writers attempted rapidly to assimilate and catch up with their Anglo-American precursors, skilfully reappropriating them. Thus, around 1970, we did not feel it to be a contradiction that we were attracted by both the moon landing of Apollo 11 and the Ballardian renunciation of outer space; in so far as "outer space" signifies an aspect of Americanism, we Japanese shared with J. G. Ballard ambivalent feelings towards the American Frontier Spirit and the space age. It is ironic that while we became fascinated with America through reading sf, it was also through sf that we found it necessary to criticize and defamiliarize that country later. Both the cult and the anti-cult of outer space constituted an Anglo-American cultural legacy that our own postwar Occidentalism drove us to acquire. In the early 1970s we did not yet anticipate the ascendancy of Pax Japonica in the 1980s, following Pax Americana in the previous decades, when

our postwar Occidentalism came to be matched by "cyber-Orientalism" on the part of American.

Therefore, when the Tokyo publisher Atelier Peyotl assigned me in 1990 to write an introduction to the Japanese edition of Ballard's *Crash* (tr. Kiichiro Yanashita, 1992), it seemed impossible for me to complete the task without rethinking the relationship between the original publication of *Crash* in 1973 and what followed it later. Indeed, when *Crash* appeared, as the first of Ballard's "technoscape trilogy," it struck us as the deepest insight into the advent of techno-erotics as they began to encroach on the inner space Ballard had persistently explored. And yet, re-reading the text from a 1990 perspective caused me to recognize an otherwise unnoticed literary historical coincidence: 1973 was the year of both Ballard's *Crash* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Nineteen seventy-three saw the close of the Vietnam War, soon followed by revelations of President Nixon's Watergate scandal. Disillusionment and disorientation filled the political atmosphere of the early 70s, even as we gradually became unable to live without the spectacles, pseudo-events and sexual effects produced by media technology (as theoreticians like Daniel Boorstin and Guy Debord have explained lucidly). From this viewpoint, the coincidental literary "crash" mentioned above is highly symptomatic, since the British champion of New Wave describes an idiosyncratic hero, Dr Robert Vaughan, obsessed with committing double-suicide with Elizabeth Taylor in a car crash, while the American representative of postmodern metafiction characterizes the innocent protagonist Tyron Slothrop as techno-sexually intertwined with the very mechanics of the V2 rocket. The more we look into both texts, the more apparent what they share becomes: that is, techno-sexual politics. In order to further investigate the crash-course between technology and sexuality in the 70s, Ballard reorganized what he had conceived as

# HOW TO BE A FICTIONAUT

## Chapter 19:

### Safety Check

Ian Watson

A central problem of being a fictionaut nowadays is the safety-check.

A fictionaut navigates the seas and oceans of narrative (not to mention lakes and ponds). But there are new rocks and reefs in those waters.

In the old days we only had spell-check and style-check programs in our word-processing software. Most creative writers worth their salt would ignore the style-check aspect, because the way a writer shapes a sentence is their signature. It's idiosyncratic, personal. That's their unique voice.

Look at James Joyce. *Dubliners* reads like a highly superior style-check collection – apart from that final big last sentence in "The Dead" about the snow falling faintly and faintly falling all over Ireland and his soul swooning slowly et cetera, which some subsequent critic said is the most perfect sentence in the English language apart from, perhaps, one word. I've always wondered which word that is.

When people talk about perfect sentences, it's as though there's some ideal, Platonic collection of sentences in linguistic heaven which we can aspire to discover, rather like Michelangelo perceiving the ideal sculptural form hidden within the block of marble, just needing to be chipped out.

When I was younger I used to collect people's candidates for perfect sentences. Flaubert probably thought that his entire opus consisted of impeccable sentences, and Albert Camus has that post-Flaubertian character in his novel set in Algeria who is convinced that he'll produce a masterpiece – if only he can get the first sentence exactly right. He's been trying to do so for the past 20 years.

Old Alfred Lord Tennyson insisted with sublime Victorian eurocentricity that the finest bunch of words in

any language is a bit of the Tenth Idyll of Theocritus. The part about how pederastic Herakles loses young lad Hylas in a pond. Naturally I memorized this. *Tris men Hulan ausen, tris d'ar ho pais huparkusen*, et cetera. "Three times he called Hylas, three times the boy heard him, et cetera." I used to fantasize that some patriotic Greek shipping billionaire might fund a big quiz prize. I'd be accosted in the street somewhere by his representative accompanied by a TV cameraman. To win I only needed to identify what Tennyson thought was the most perfect string of words. "*Tris men Hulan ausen*," I would promptly recite.

Anyway, *Finnegans Wake* certainly isn't a style-check book, though perhaps for this very reason it's a bit hard to process through your head.

You might get style-checking imposed upon you by your publishers after you finish your piece of fiction, because that's the easy, automated, cheap way to copy-edit. Run a style-check, and this rejigs your prose in a trice. Sometimes it genuinely improves the flow. Alternatively it turns your text into cardboard. A metaphor check wouldn't let me to get away with this mixed metaphor, but you know what I mean.

The safety-check's a different kettle of fish. You're warranting your publisher, upon pain of indemnifying them until you go bankrupt, that what you write is utterly original, and doesn't violate anyone else's copyright, and doesn't quote anyone else's words without permission being secured and paid for. Nor must your text trample upon any toes. It mustn't offend against current definitions of obscenity, nor insult any special interest group, who might take legal action, nor defame any individual or institution which might be offended, or exploit real-life persons even disguisedly.